

Coal mine planned near Bryce Canyon

BLM official expects the debate to weigh environment vs. jobs

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The federal Bureau of Land Management is about to begin an environmental impact study on a proposed surface coal mine just south of the Kane County town of Alton but also fairly close to Bryce Canyon National Park.

That location is likely to spark a "jobs vs. environmental protection" debate as the BLM's Kanab Office considers the Coal Hollow Mine proposal submitted by Alton Coal Development LLC, a small company based in Huntington, Emery County.

"The proximity to the national park puts this one way up on our radar screen," said Stephen Bloch, staff attorney for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance.

The mine is projected to create about 50 jobs in Alton, a livestock and ranching community of 134 residents, according to the 2000 census. Its median household income that year was \$30,833, with 23.8 percent of the population living below the poverty line.

The proposed mine would yield about 2 million tons of coal annually. The coal would be trucked from the mine site, about three miles south of Alton, up U.S. Highway 89 to State Route 20 and then down Interstate 15 to a coal loadout facility west of Cedar City.

About 190 truck trips are anticipated each weekday.

The Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining already is processing an Alton Coal Development application to start the strip mine on 440 acres of private land. That process began in June.

The environmental study technically will address the idea of attaching nearly 3,600 acres of BLM land to that project. The federal lands surround the private parcel and another 380 acres of private property that would be part of the overall mine site.

Alton Coal Development initially applied to lease the federal coal rights on Nov. 12, 2004. After two years of review, the BLM state office established boundaries for the lease application, estimated it contains about 46 million tons of coal, and recommended the BLM's Kanab office begin its environmental process.

Tuesday's *Federal Register*, which provided notice of the environmental study process, said public scoring meetings will be conducted in Alton, Kanab, Panguitch, Cedar City and Salt Lake City. Dates and times will be announced on the state BLM Web site. None had been listed there by late Tuesday.

Development proposals for the Alton coal field are nothing new.

A study by geologist H.H. Doelling for what was is now the Utah Geological Survey estimated the Alton coal field encompasses 175 square miles beneath Kane and Garfield counties.

Doelling said almost 200 million tons of coal are within 200 feet of the surface, and thus considered suitable for strip mining.

A quarter century ago, the BLM withdrew about 184,000 acres from future consideration for coal mining because those lands were visible from Bryce Canyon and would denigrate the recreational experience of park visitors.

"That fact that this is part of a previously rejected proposal sends up a red flag," said the alliance's Bloch. "The [federal] Office of Surface Mining designated this area as unsuitable for mining 25 years ago. Some of the concerns we have initially are similar to the ones raised back then - water and air quality, not only to local residents but also to Bryce Canyon National Park."

Allen Childs, project manager for Alton Coal Development, was traveling Tuesday and could not be reached for comment.

State mining regulator Pamela Grubaugh, who has been processing Alton Coal Development's state permit application, said Tuesday that Childs is aware of the controversy likely to surround the project.

"They know they will get a lot of response from the environmental quality and want to demonstrate that they can mine responsibly and in good fashion," she said, noting that Alton Coal Development's application, like most initial mining permit requests, still needs more detailed information about numerous issues.

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